Brahmacharya

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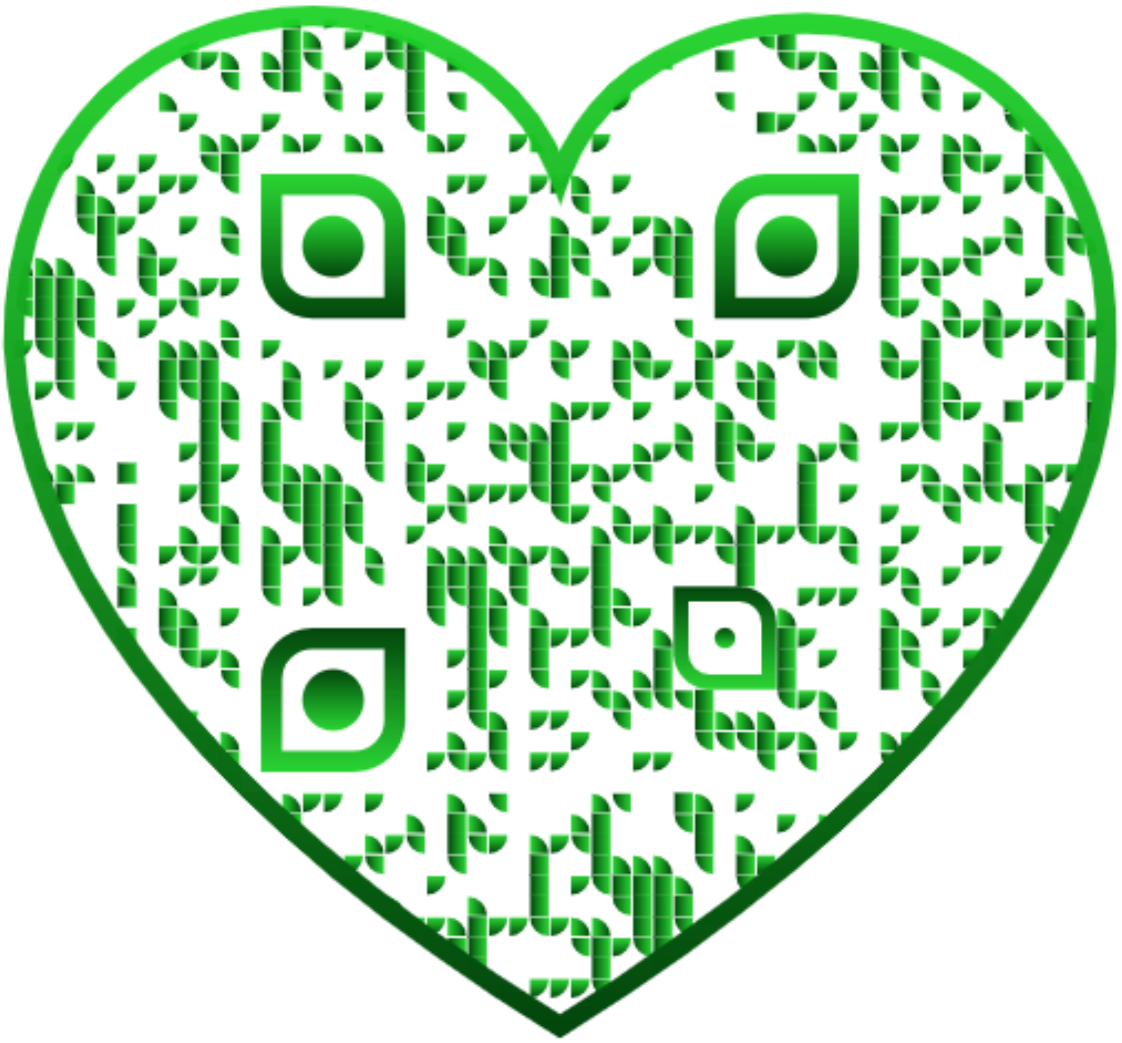
Human Birth: A Rare Opportunity

Truly does Shankara say that human birth is very rare indeed. The human form is the highest, and man the greatest being, because in that form alone lies his greatest and best chance to attain salvation—to attain Knowledge. All other creatures, be they gods or angels, have to come down to this world and attain salvation through a human body. This is a rare privilege—this human life. And such a privilege we are foolishly abusing. Without appreciating the value of such a privilege we are bringing down untold miseries on ourselves by our evil actions. Can there be a greater irony of fate? Can there be a greater fool than one who, getting such a rare chance, busies himself with worldly things and aspires not after Knowledge? Far from striving for Knowledge, we are on the contrary getting more and more steeped in ignorance. What is the reason? Man, who was almost free from diseases, who used to do whatever he willed, who used to sing; 'I have no fear of death, etc.,' and was thoroughly convinced of it—why is he today beset with a thousand fears, worried by distracting thoughts, and sinking in the abysmal ocean of discontent? What is the reason? It is all due to lack of continence. Time was when a child could by his reply, pregnant with wisdom, strike dumb his enquirer, though an intellectual giant; when children like Nachiketas and sages like Shukadeva were born. Why has such a society been brought to such a pass? It is because we have lost that ancient fire, that ancient force in us, due to lack of continence. Without continence nothing great can be achieved.

What is Brahmacharya

What is Brahmacharya or continence? It is the conservation of the sexual energy. In all spheres of life, whether spiritual or material, whether pertaining to this world or the other, this conservation of the sexual energy is absolutely necessary if success is to be attained. Without absolute continence, you can neither have perfect health, nor be able to do good to others, or attain realisation. The famous Dr. Nichols says, 'The suspension of the use of generative organ is attended with a notable increase of bodily



and mental vigour and spiritual life.' Therefore there is no hope of success in any sphere of life, whether material or spiritual, unless man maintains absolute continence. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'When a man succeeds in the conservation of his sexual energy, his intellect reflects the image of Brahman, even as a glass gives a perfect image when its back is painted with mercury solution. The man who carries this image of Brahman in his heart is able to accomplish everything—he will succeed wonderfully in whatever action he engages himself.' So without continence our life is useless.

The dictionary meaning of the word Brahmacharya is that ashrama or stage of life which a man undertakes for the study of Brahman or the Vedas. The Vedas are generally studied in boyhood, so the first of the four ashramas or stages of life is called the Brahmacharya Ashrama. The taking to this ashrama is obligatory on all, specially on the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, and the Vaishyas. Why it is obligatory? Because all the great and noble qualities of character are cultivated and easily acquired in this period of life. Nowadays it has become a fashion, so to say, in many countries to impart vocational education to children. No attention is paid to the improvement of their moral side, let alone the spiritual. In former days, however, this was not the custom with us. The primary attention was given to the building up of character; next came the imparting of spiritual education; and last of all, some used to impart vocational training also. Then everyone knew that character and knowledge were things that were needed most, and that money and all other things would come of themselves to one who possessed these two. Character and knowledge are not subservient to money; the truth lies the other way about.

This ashrama or stage of life is obligatory because of the fact that noble qualities are cultured in this period. Manu says, 'In order to increase the force of his character, a Brahmachari, living in the house of his Guru or preceptor and having perfect control over his passions, should duly practise these (viz. Serving the preceptor, repetition of mystic syllables, austerities, non-injury, forbearance, etc.).'

This stage of life is the very basis of all other stages of life. The other stages, viz. The married life, the life of a recluse, and that of the sannyasin—all these stages of life wholly and fully depend on this period of Brahmacharya. Just as a building, though large and beautiful, is unstable if it is built on a shifting ground, even so no duties of any stage of life can be performed with any degree of success if this period of Brahmacharya has not been fully utilised—nay, one is not even thought fit to enter any other stage of life.

The Lord speaks in the Bhagavata: 'When the Brahmachari (i.e. the boy undergoing Brahmacharya) shines like fire due to the faithful performance of great penances, when his sins and past evil tendencies have been burnt down by them and he has acquired love for Me (the Lord), then the preceptor will examine him (with respect to his knowledge); having passed the test the boy should offer honorarium to the Guru and take his purificatory bath with his permission, and then that good scion of the twice-born classes may take to a householder's life or to the life of a recluse or forthwith to the fourth stage of life, viz. Sannyasa, according to his own choice.' So we see, this stage of life must be gone through by all.

Continence and Character

Continence is such a great power, so noble, so necessary for all, that it should not be confined only to the first stage of life. It is wrong to think that it should be practised only in boyhood. Its function is not finished with the mere laying out of the foundation-stone of life; it is not ended with the climbing of the first step of the ladder of life. It functions throughout life. Without Brahmacharya it is impossible to build one's character even as it is impossible to raise a building without mortar. Again, just as a particular part of a building totters where the strength of mortar is lost or weakened, so also that part of our life is exposed to dangers wherein the strength of Brahmacharya or continence is lacking.

The qualities that are practised in the first stage of life are, all of them, equally necessary in all other stages of life. Even in the householder's life, continence is of great importance, not to speak of its necessity in the other three stages. Without Brahmacharya it is absolutely impossible to lead a householder's life according to the injunctions of the scriptures. Without self-control householders can never be true to their ideals. Sri Ramakrishna used to say to all, not excepting the householders, 'Make the knowledge of oneness your own first and then do your work'; 'Take firm hold of the post, i.e. God, and then go on whirling'; 'Keep the greater part of your mind fixed on God and with the rest attend to your ordinary rounds of duty.' With these and many other beautiful similes he used to teach householders how they should lead their lives. If one is to live as a householder up to these instructions, the first thing that is necessary is Brahmacharya.

First of all, control over the senses is required. The power of curbing, at will, the outward tendencies is to be acquired first. In one word, he must be perfectly self-controlled. It is for this reason that some speak of the householder's life as the greatest stage of life. It is indeed a very pure ashrama. It is not for brutes but for the purest in heart, for the perfectly continent. For the human brutes the Lord has not prescribed any ashrama. In no scripture can it be found that in the householder's life one can give free reins to one's passions. Just imagine for a moment how pure is that ashrama where saints and monks, and even the Lord Himself, come to be born! What great caution one must exercise here! There can be no welfare without Brahmacharya, be he a student, a householder, a recluse in the forest, or an itinerant monk; neither can national welfare come without it; nor will the world know of peace.

The Concept of Continence Beyond Indian Borders

It is not only in our country or our religion that Brahmacharya is so much emphasised or has such a great hold; all the countries and all the religions of the world extol it. In ancient days absolute continence was not observed in other parts of the world; it was the Vedic Rishis who first practised it in India . We have it in the Prashna Upanishad that when six Rishis, viz, Sukesha Bharadwaja and others—all devoted to Brahman—came to Rishi Pippalada to acquire the highest knowledge, the latter asked them to observe Brahmacharya for one year more at the end of which he promised to initiate them into the highest knowledge. Again, in the Chhandogya Upanishad we have the dialogue between Indra, Virochana, and Brahma where Brahma taught Indra the knowledge of Brahman after making him undergo Brahmacharya for one hundred and one years.

From India this idea of Brahmacharya spread to Egypt among the Neo-Platonists and to Greece among the Pythagoreans, and more or less to many other countries of Europe , in later days. It was again from India that this idea spread to various countries of Asia . The Persians took it from India . Then the

Buddhist preachers carried it far and wide. The Essenes took it from the Buddhists; and the Christians partly from the Neo-Platonists and partly from the Essenes. These Christians, in their turn, spread it in many other countries. It is seen that in all those countries where this idea of Brahmacharya has gone—there have arisen many great men. And no men have done greater service to their countries and to the world at large than these men of continence. We may take St. Paul and Sir Isaac Newton as examples. So I say that those who want to do any real good to themselves or to their country, should practise Brahmacharya irrespective of the stage of life they might be in.

Six Allied Disciplines of Continence

One should not think that Brahmacharya is to be observed only by the pious; it is equally efficacious to those who do not care for religion, who do not believe in God or transmigration of the soul or in the Vedas. Because 'the six treasures', as they are called, viz. The control of the senses and the mind, forbearance, abstinence, faith, and mental concentration—all of which are included within Brahmacharya—are of the highest value to those who want their own good and that of their country, be they materialists or unbelievers in salvation or in the hereafter. Those among the materialists who are good and great have a very high regard for these 'six treasures'. Those who do not possess one or other of these six treasures, can never achieve anything really great. These are indeed six treasures.

What do they care for in the world—those, who have control over their passions and their mind? He is really poor, a beggar, who does not possess these six merits even though he be a mighty emperor. A moneyed or propertied man passes his days in fear or anxious thoughts, but the possessor of these six virtues is greater than monarchs, is even worshipped by the gods. He is filled with bliss and contentment to overflowing. Out of the fullness of these 'six', earned by him, he can freely give to others. What can give more joy than this? In times of danger the rich flee for their lives leaving their friends and relatives to their fate, whereas those who are rich in these six superior merits pass their days without the least trace of fear—nay, they encourage and help others. Those who possess Brahmacharya are real lovers of their country. Blessed indeed are they.

Some Objections Answered

Now it might be urged against these world-renouncing Brahmacharins or monks that they go against the commandments of the Lord as they do not marry and enter the householder's life. From the very beginning of creation the two paths of reaching God, viz. Through restrained enjoyment and complete renunciation, are in vogue. The Lord has willed it so. The Vedas say that whenever the spirit of renunciation comes, one should renounce and be a monk, no matter, whether it comes before or after marriage. 'One should undertake that supreme journey (i.e. should take to the monk's life) even from the first stage of life, viz. That of a student, or from the householder's or from the forest-recluse's life; one should undertake the supreme journey the very day one is seized with the spirit of renunciation.' Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatana, Sanatkumara, Shuka, and others were all monks even from their very birth.

Some might say that if one renounces the world without marrying and begetting children, one is not absolved from the natural debts1 and cannot get liberation. But in the Bhagavata (11.5.41) Karabhajana, son of Rishabhadeva, says to Janaka, 'The man who leaves off all works or duties and takes wholeheartedly to the worship of Mukunda (God) has no debt whatsoever to be discharged—be it to the gods, Rishis, relatives, manes, men, or other beings.' In the Mahabharata (167.26) the sage Narada says to Shukadeva, 'Without marrying, be the controller of your senses.' Jesus Christ too says, 'And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake' (Math. Xix. 12).

Some apprehend that if one is to lead a celibate life, one will be prone to many diseases. It is wrong. Dr. Nichols says, 'It is a medical—a physiological fact that the best blood in the body goes to form the elements of reproduction, in both sexes. In a pure and orderly life this matter is absorbed. It goes back into the circulation, ready to form the finest brain, nerve, and muscular tissue. This life of man, carried back and diffused through his system, makes him manly, strong, brave, heroic. If wasted, it leaves him effeminate, weak, and irresolute, intellectually and physically debilitated, and a prey to sexual irritation, disordered function, morbid sensation, disordered muscular movement, a wretched nervous system, epilepsy, insanity, and death.' In the Jnana-Sankalini Tantra, Shiva says, 'Torturing the body is no austerity—Brahmacharaya is the best austerity. A man of unbroken continence is no man but a god'.

We too see it often, before our very eyes, how weak, chicken-hearted, and narrow-minded are those who are wicked and slaves to their passions, and how gloomy and miserable are their lives. And how forceful, vigorous, courageous, and blissful again are the lives of those who are virtuous and have brought the senses under control.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'Whoever can give up the sex idea, can spurn at the world.' He who has given up the sense-enjoyments, the outgoing tendencies of whose mind have been stopped—know for certain that God is not far away from such a heart, His shadow has already fallen there, He can no longer keep Himself away from such a devotee who cares not for anything else. Then he feels an ecstatic joy in every pore of his body. So intense is the joy that caught in it he loses all outward consciousness. He goes into trance and enjoys this ineffable joy in one continuous stream of consciousness. If that highest bliss is to be got and enjoyed without any break, the desire for these fleeting pleasures of sense-objects which ultimately lead man to terrible miseries should be mercilessly eschewed—not that kind of hypocritical renunciation which lasts for a day or two, but the wholesale uprooting of even the least vestige of such desires. If anyone succeeds in doing this, he will feel that what he was so long enjoying was but an infinitesimal part of that ocean of bliss filtering in through one or other of the sense-organs, and that now through every cell of his body he is enjoying this infinite bliss—that this flesh-and-blood body has been changed and transfigured into something divine, to be a worthy receptacle for the divine Bliss. Can perversity go any further than foregoing this infinite Bliss for petty sense-enjoyments?

How to Conquer Lust

The only way to conquer lust is to look upon all women as our own mother, as images of the Divine Mother. Just as one is filled with devotion and prompted to worship when one sees an image of the Divine Mother, so should one be filled with devotion, be prompted to worship when one sees a woman. Never should we allow the idea of woman to rise in our minds. To know a woman as woman is to open

the gateway to hell, while to know her as the Divine Mother is the way to salvation. We have to change the angle of vision. If we do so, we shall be free from the fear of temptation.

We have been born again and again, but what have we done to raise ourselves, to become divine? We have run again and again after these sense-enjoyments and suffered untold miseries. But never too late to mend. A moment's sincere resignation of oneself and everything one possesses at the feet of the Lord is quite sufficient to ensure one's Liberation. Yes, it must be sincere. This single act will revolutionise one's whole outlook on life. One will no longer see men and women but divinities. The hellish idea of sex and all sense of worldly enjoyments will appear stale or vanish altogether, and instead will be found a joy infinitely superior in blessedness.

Conclusion

The world as it is, is full of misery; but it lies within the power of each man and woman to transform it into all-bliss. Every man is God, every woman is none else but the Divine Mother. Change thus your present outlook on life, and the kingdom of Heaven is now and here. Brahmacharya is at once the means and the goal of life.